

AFL-CIO names career bureaucrat Liz Shuler to head US labor federation

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The AFL-CIO Executive Council on Friday chose Liz Shuler as the federation's acting president, replacing Richard Trumka who died August 5. She will serve the remainder of Trumka's term until the next convention, slated for June of 2022.

Shuler, who served as AFL-CIO secretary treasurer since 2009, had been favored by Trumka to succeed him. Like Trumka she is a lifelong trade union bureaucrat, a creature of the apparatus. However, unlike Trumka she has no record during her rise in the bureaucracy with any, even tangential, relation with the class struggle. Outside of the narrow confines of the AFL-CIO leadership, her name recognition is close to zero among workers.

She takes charge as an intense political crisis grips the ruling class both overseas and domestically with the resurgence of the COVID pandemic. Resistance is growing to the government's homicidal policy of reopening schools and workplaces as the Delta variant spreads. The past several months have seen a surge of strikes, largely in defiance of the union apparatuses, as workers seek to reverse the steady fall in living standards in the face of an orgy of self-enrichment by the world's billionaires.

Another career bureaucrat was named to replace Shuler as AFL-CIO secretary treasurer, Fred Redmond, United Steelworkers International vice president for Human Affairs.

The appointment of Shuler garnered media attention as the first woman to head the federation. Redmond is the first African American to hold the number two spot. However, despite the nod to identity politics, nothing in Shuler's record suggests the slightest oppositional sentiments.

Shuler comes from Portland, Oregon originally. Her father was a member of the International Brotherhood

of Electrical Workers at Portland General Electric, where her mother also worked. She began as an IBEW organizer in Portland in the early 1990s, with her main assignment not organizing workers but lobbying the Democratic Party. She later was assigned to California, where she helped defeat Proposition 226 that would have banned the funneling of union dues to political candidates without worker consent.

From there she moved directly to the IBEW national office in Washington D.C. After serving in the union's legislative department in 2004, she was made assistant to the International President. In 2009 she snagged the AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer job, number two spot in the federation.

In an interview with Bloomberg following her selection, Shuler said that the passage of the renamed Richard L Trumka PRO Act would be a top priority. "We are laser focused on continuing that fight," she said. The PRO Act is being advanced by the Biden administration with the aim of shoring up the union apparatus as a means of suppressing the class struggle and preparing for war. It has won the enthusiastic backing of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left organizations, which see the unions as a path for career advancement.

Shuler's selection as acting AFL-CIO president would seem to place her in the front runner position for election to a full term when delegates meet in 2022.

Even before his death Trumka had been trying to line up support for Shuler as his successor. Association of Flight Attendants-CWA President Sarah Nelson, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, was also seeking the job and attempting to line up support as well. In contrast to the colorless Shuler, Nelson has occasionally indulged in radical sounding tub thumping, including her well publicized comments

about a “general strike” during the 2019 government shutdown.

Nelson’s rhetoric aside, she has overseen the destruction of thousands of airline workers’ jobs and worked to suppress the class struggle and subordinate workers to the capitalist Democratic Party.

In a 2019 comment by *The Guardian* on the AFL-CIO succession, there were concerns voiced over the elevation of Shuler to replace Trumka when he retired. John Samuelson, president of the Transport Workers Union, told the *Guardian*, “If anything, she’s guilty of being too much of a team player. She has the capacity to do more than that.”

Nelson had the backing of United Mine Workers President Cecil Roberts. Other major unions, including the American Federation of Teachers, had reportedly not at that time expressed a preference between Shuler and Nelson. Last week AFT President Randi Weingarten announced her backing for Shuler, ensuring her election.

In any event the selection of the AFL-CIO president is a bureaucratic process designed to exclude even the most remote influence by workers. The federation officers are chosen by convention delegates, themselves largely top officials or hand-picked cronies. In the 100 years since the time of AFL President Samuel Gompers, there have been just six presidents of the AFL and AFL-CIO union federations, including now Shuler.

Shuler takes office amidst a continuing crisis and decline of the US trade unions and trade unions globally. Total US union membership declined in 2020 to 14.6 million members, compared to a peak of 21 million in 1979. As a percentage of the workforce, union membership stands at 10.3 percent and just 6.2 percent in the private sector, both historic lows.

During the pandemic, the AFL-CIO has focused its efforts on bolstering the Democratic Party and suppressing worker opposition to the “herd immunity” policy of the ruling class. The teachers unions in particular have played a foul role by spearheading the reopening of schools even as infections among children are skyrocketing.

A growing mood of militancy is evident in the working class, with workers rejecting attempts by the employers in league with the unions to impose the cost of the pandemic onto their shoulders. In many cases

this has taken the form of an open rebellion by workers against the unions, with overwhelming votes against pro-company concessions contracts.

On taking office Shuler faces a series of crises, including mass opposition among teachers, students and parents to the school reopening policy of the Biden administration, which has the full support of the AFL-CIO and teacher unions.

The fact that at this critical juncture the AFL-CIO bureaucracy feels compelled to turn power over to a cipher like Shuler reflects a deep crisis. The unions have lost credibility in the eyes of millions of workers.

This was shown by the strike by Volvo workers in Virginia who repeatedly voted down sellout contracts brought back by the United Auto Workers. Volvo workers, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, organized a rank-and-file committee independent of the UAW that provided truthful information and sought to break the isolation being imposed by the union.

The corporatist, pro-capitalist unions long ago ceased to wage any struggle on behalf of workers. New organizations of struggle are vitally needed based on an entirely new perspective and program. That is the fight for international socialism.



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